

2.1.2008 - Wild Monongahela: Keeping West Virginia â€œWild and Wonderfulâ€•

Recently,
I was pleased to introduce legislation to designate additional areas as wilderness within the Monongahela National Forest in our State of West Virginia.

Our
senior Senator, Robert C. Byrd, is fond of noting that: "West Virginia is one of the most beautiful and unique places. It is the most southern of the northern and the most northern of the southern; the most eastern of the western and the most western of the eastern. It is where the East says good morning to the West, and where Yankee Doodle and Dixie kiss each other good night!"

Indeed,
West Virginia
is a most beautiful and unique place. With
the introduction of my legislation, "Wild Monongahela: A National Legacy for West Virginia's Special Places," I am striving to keep it that way.

By
way of background, the Monongahela National Forest is comprised of over 919,000 acres of federal land in 10 counties of the eastern portion of West Virginia. The forest is a major recreational resource for West Virginians as well as people from neighboring States, hosting approximately three million visitors annually. Currently, the forest has five federally designated wilderness areas comprising 78,041 acres: Otter Creek, Dolly Sods, Laurel Fork North and South, and the Cranberry Wilderness.

As
part of the revision of the Forest Plan completed in 2006, 18 roadless areas were inventoried and evaluated for their wilderness potential. As a result of this process, I was proud to propose legislation, joined in support by my West Virginia colleagues Representatives Shelly Moore Capito and Alan Mollohan, to designate seven of the evaluated areas as wilderness.

Totaling
47,128 acres, three of the areas are additions to existing wilderness: the Cranberry Expansion in Webster and Pocahontas Counties, the Dolly Sods Expansion in Tucker County and the Dry Fork Expansion in Tucker County to the Otter Creek Wilderness. The other four are proposed new wilderness areas: Big Draft in Greenbrier County, Cheat Mountain in Randolph

County, Roaring Plains West in Pendleton and Randolph Counties and Spice Run in Greenbrier and Pocahontas Counties.

Under the new Land and Resource Management Plan for the Monongahela National Forest, all seven areas are now being managed essentially as wilderness. Cheat Mountain, the Cranberry Expansion, the Dry Fork addition to Otter Creek Wilderness and Roaring Plains West are under Management Prescription 5.1, Recommended Wilderness. Meanwhile, the Big Draft area, the Dolly Sods Expansion and the Spice Run area are under Management Prescription 6.2, Backcountry Recreation. This management prescription emphasizes a non-motorized setting with a largely natural environment and a freedom from management-related disturbance.

Now, that may sound very technical, but at its heart, this is about protecting the soul of West Virginia and keeping it "Wild and Wonderful." Our southern mountains have been yielding their coal for generations and our northern ridge lines are being targeted by the merchants of wind power. More development is coming, and in most cases, it is welcomed.

As West Virginians, however, we are intimately connected to our land. Our ancestors planted their roots deep in our misty hollers and our majestic mountains years ago. We hunt these woods; we fish these streams; and we know that we will be judged by future generations on our stewardship of this land that is West Virginia.

That is why I believe that it is of paramount importance that we set aside some of God's handiwork by preserving these beautiful federal lands in their pristine state. And I am not alone. In addition to my fellow West Virginians, U.S. Reps. Alan Mollohan and Shelley Moore Capito, my legislation has received support from a wide range of West Virginia organizations, including the West Virginia AFL-CIO, the West Virginia Council of Churches, various West Virginia chapters of Trout Unlimited, the Greenbrier County Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Pocahontas County Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Fayette County Commission. U.S. Sens. Robert Byrd and Jay Rockefeller have also introduced companion legislation in the Senate.

It is essential that we, as West Virginians,

preserve these lands in their natural state, as they represent a significant national resource. But more importantly, to us, they constitute a fundamental right of West Virginians to retain a vital link to our heritage, and to know that, forever more, these lands will remain in their natural state as our Creator forged them. We cherish this as nothing less and nothing more than our birthright as West Virginians.